Really Techno

'Ich bin einer,' I say when my turn comes. *I am one.*

I've been here before, outside this colossal power station in Fredrichshain, just over the Spree in the old East, very near to where the Berlin wall once stood. On previous occasions I queued with friends, the first time for three hours on a balmy Saturday night, which also happened to be the club's birthday party. I got in just as the sun was coming up. The second time for forty minutes in midwinter, the temperature a bone throbbing minus eleven. Today I'm acting like a Berliner and doing it solo on an indifferent Sunday in April.

I'm not here to take drugs, or get drunk, I'm not really looking to hook up; in fact once I get in, if you dance too close to me I'll probably move. I'm here as a forty five year old woman, to be on my own, surrounded by techno music played on one of the best sound systems in the world, the harder and louder the better.

The building towers over us, monolithic concrete and steel, graffiti covering the bottom floors. It's getting on for 3pm and there's about a half an hour queue leading up to the entrance. Most of them are male, one mixed group of hopeful tourists who get refused, two thickly bearded men who have obviously spent last night hooking up with each other. They have the kinetics of recent sex in the way they touch each other and shimmy to the muffled beat, which gets louder as we get closer to the door. In the final few meters nobody speaks. We're within range of the bouncers now and according to the websites that give advice on how to get in, drawing attention to yourself by being too loud will get you turned away.

There's a whole mythology of cool around getting into this place, especially among 20-something corporate types and curious tourists. One time I saw a couple who looked like they'd emerged from a Vogue photo shoot, or a private yacht party, or both – nuclear suntans and white linens, dazzling teeth, expensive gold jewellery - children of the hyper wealthy – arguing petulantly with the bouncers because they'd been refused.

This isn't a club for the beautiful people, although there are many beautiful people inside. It's a place that emerged from the East German queer punk scene, and what that couple didn't realise in their moneyed armour, was that the door policy exists expressly to keep them out. To stop the club being colonised by tourists or corporate types: some idea of the sleek life like the Buddha Bar, or Nobu, or the terraces of Ibiza or some other high fashion hangout where the atmosphere is like a cross between a wake and a self-conscious teenage disco; where everyone watches everyone else so fiercely that by the end of the evening their faces are flayed with the strain.

The name is a synthesis of two Berlin districts, which were separated by the wall, Kreuz*berg* and Freidrichs*hain*. The club itself carved out of an old power station as big as the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern. Sven Marquardt the head doorman who famously turned away Britney Spears said he wants people who look like they know how to party. I have only been once where he was on the door, in gold Elvis shades, his face full of piercings and tattoos; sovereign of the queue, impassive, a contemporary Captain Kurtz.

Being outside looking in evokes in me an immediate, intense longing to be inside. The experience reminds me of an art installation I stumbled across once in a field in Norwich. A shack of grey corrugated iron from inside of which

emanated some very loud and crunchy hip hop. Involuntarily, my body moved. I walked around the whole structure twice before realising that there was, deliberately, obviously, no door.

Queuing for Berghain is a bit like this, or rather, like being part of a mass performance art piece which enacts purgatory. For some, just to have stood in the queue is enough, even if it means they have presented themselves to be turned away.

I'm close enough now to see the faces of the bouncers. They are turning away a group of young Berliners in front of me who've jumped the queue, and a lone girl from Glasgow with her pineapple hair and stonewashed denim who told me she read about the place in a magazine. I'm in a black hoodie and jeans. I'm nothing glitzy or special. There is a terrible suspended pause and then it's my turn.

I look him in the eye and fight a sudden urge to yawn.

The bouncer smiles. 'How many times have you been here?' He asks in English.

I wonder what to say. None, many, a few. I wonder if I should lie. I know I'm showing my age. At 45 I look lived in these days. Perhaps I should know better. Now I am entering middle age I should know my place and restrict my public dancing to the occasional house party where if I'm lucky after too many glasses of Prosecco someone will spin me round to something with a Nile Rogers bassline and my heels will get stuck in the carpet.

I came to Berlin partly to escape this, which is, like a lot of things, more pronounced in the UK than in Europe. Single, still strong, childfree, I have a freedom and a flexibility unavailable to many women my age. My childfree

status is my liberation, but it also puts me out of time with some of my peers, and the general, oppressive conservative narrative of what we should be doing when. Especially as a woman, and even more especially as a queer woman.

Judith, now Jack Halberstam and others have argued that for the queer community it is not our sex acts which constitute queerness, but rather what we do with our time. S/he suggests that we t*ry to think about queerness as an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices,* so that we can *detach queerness from sexual identity and come closer to understanding Foucault's comment in 'Friendship as a Way of Life' that 'homosexuality threatens people as a 'way of life' rather than as a way of having sex.*

This is what the many – hilarious – websites which obsess about how to get into Berghain don't get: this is primarily a queer club. And you can't really pretend to be queer. Perhaps it's something that you can become, but mostly it's something you just are.

In the end I say nothing. The bouncer nods me in. And as always, the ego lifts.

The first thing to happen once I'm over the threshold is the tricky business of my phone. Before the bag search they take my smartphone and put a sticker over the camera lens and another on the screen to prevent me taking selfies. If they find you taking pictures they'll throw you out. This one simple restriction creates an immediate shift in the atmosphere. No one is watching, or rather, no one is watching themselves watching the party. What happens in Berghain stays in Berghain. A quick search on Instagram under #Berghain reveals most of the

pictures are from the queue. Once inside, the space is liberated from the shadow world of social media, except as a means of telling your friends where you are. People who take their phones out for longer than a moment get frowned on and it shows. In all the corners, and chill out rooms and in the garden, people are actually talking to each other. The only network you need is inside the club.

Once I've paid my sixteen Euros and got my arm stamped I walk around the corner into the lobby. There are people in various stages of their experience. Some lolled out over the banquettes, pale and jaded, ready to go home. Someone is asleep. Others are waiting for friends, or just arrived, a little dazed like me, still trying to navigate the transition between outside and in.

I queue for the Garderobe to hand in my stuff. I've come prepared. In my bag a change of clothes, a clean shirt, sunglasses, chewing gum, lip balm. I need to separate what I need now and later. Many others are doing the same. I see one of my neighbours in front of me in the queue. She's Italian and in her twenties and come to Berlin for the music scene and to get away from the economic stagnation in Italy. She greets me with a sweaty hug. She's changing her shoes because she's been here since it opened. Guest list. I think she's dating one of the DJs. She tells me I got here just in time. Len Faki has just started, to be followed by Ben Klock. Two of Berghain's most popular resident DJs. She's already twitching to the beat, hyper, pupils like moons.

'Enjoy.' She dances off and blows me a kiss.

The music from upstairs is louder, people around me are bouncing to it. At the Garderobe they sell earplugs and t-shirts with images of the stacks of black

Funktion One speakers, which are making the noise upstairs. When they were installed they were the most expensive club sound system in the world.

All sounds are compression waves – they create waves of pressure in the fabric of the physical world. The most powerful can move solid objects, burst your eardrums or shatter glass. This is partly how explosions work.

The human ear has more neural connections to the brain than the eye. It can hear in a range between 20Htz all the way up to 20,000Htz – something like ten octaves of sound. Through a combination of deep physics and deep listening good engineers understand how to direct and construct sound so that it can amplify across a whole stadium without distorting, or create the huge, cathedral sound of Berghain while still allowing for clubbers to speak to each other on the dance floor without shouting. Even on club nights the sound is only at 10-20% of its capacity, otherwise the physical experience of the sound would just be too exhausting.

The speakers have been positioned exactly and calibrated precisely to minimise feedback and articulate the full range of every sound. When you've come to dance it's a difference that you notice with your body. Between being able to hear the sound and live inside of it. If it's a bad sound the noise will be an assault to your senses, a battle between you and the feedback to get to the beat. A bad sound creates a bad atmosphere, bad tinnitus and a bad headache.

Tony Andrews, who designed the speakers, says that good sound is *a state of meditation. If you feel yourself being pulled towards a meditative state, you know the sound is good. When it's really good, you don't know the difference between the inside of your head and the outside of your head*.

Walking up the stairs to the main room is an overwhelming sensory overload. Almost like taking a deep breath and diving underwater. The music moves through me, around me, with a terrible force. Loud and crisp and deep. The lights mirror the synaptic lightning of the rhythm, bass thudding like heartbeat. The noise lifts me off my feet. Even if you don't like techno it's a spectacle of sound and people. And the speakers are so exquisitely calibrated that the sound is something your whole body hears. This is music as full body experience; music as drugs.

If you cut the sound and look at the shapes that people are making you would know they were dancing to techno from the angles of their bodies. It's an upright kind of dancing, almost militarised, tight punches and arm movements. There's a girl on the podium beating her arms in the air while moving her whole body in a sinuous curve, another making fronds from his fingers, dragging them through the air as if he were underwater. Dancing to techno rejects the disco values of sociability, of looking at your partners, making eye contact, for a much more individuated approach. Everyone on the dance floor is together but separate, facing the DJ booth, lost in sound and light. You dance with other people as anonymous silhouettes, maybe catching someone's eye when the break is especially ecstatic or a mix just dropped. Watching from the edges, the dance floor *heaves*, it moves as one body, like the surface of the sea.

Techno music evolved out of the broken industrial landscapes of Detroit and before that, Germany, with the Übermenschen of electronic music, Kraftwerk. Early Detroit techno pioneer Derrick May describes his music as Hi Tek Soul or 'George Clinton meets Kraftwerk in an elevator.' The music takes the rigidity of

Kraftwerk's mechanistic orderliness and adds jazz rhythms. In the 80s new sounds were made possible by advances in digital technology – the Roland 303 bass synthesiser and the 808 drum machine – the rise of which coincided with a period of apocalyptic decline in the car manufacturing heartlands of America, Chicago and Detroit.

Early Detroit techno musicians – Derrick May, Carl Craig, Jeff Mills and the influential Underground Resistance Collective – were Regan-era militants. They found empowerment in the new underground youth movement of kids of all cultures coming together to dance to repetitive, trance-inducing beats in the empty warehouses of Detroit. The music spread to Europe, these new sounds drew people in their thousands to illegal raves, to underground car parks, fields in the middle of nowhere, abandoned warehouses, to dance for hours free of health and safety regulations, club promoters, security, police. The state's response was, at least in the UK, to act like an authoritarian parent. In the early 90s in the UK, more than a few people gathering around a stereo listening to 'repetitive beats' became a criminal offence, thanks to the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act.

But in the grime of post-wall Berlin, techno found a spiritual home. There were plenty of abandoned buildings in which to host parties and, in the post Stasi-era, a laxity of law and order meant that illegal parties, especially around the wall, weren't really policed. Spaces like Tresor, Der Bunker and E-Werk emerged along with groups like Basic Channel and techno became the soundtrack to a reunified Berlin.

Now the music has become assimilated to the point where Berghain is considered not an entertainment, but a cultural venue. It's partly a tax dodge –

7% Culture tax instead of 19% Entertainment tax – but as a classification it now means that, in Berlin at least, dancing to techno at Berghain is considered high art.

I buy a Club Mate – a highly caffeinated yerba mate that tastes more natural than Red Bull. Around me there are a lot of people who are very high, gurning, nodding their heads to the music, talking loose and chewy to their friends.

When I was younger I used to take ecstasy when I went out dancing. My memories of these experiences are – mostly – ecstatic. Overwhelmed by a feeling of wellbeing and evanescence. Lost on the dance floor for hours. But since then I can make this happen without the drug. It's a neural turning that occurs in the brain, pathways once connected that can be recalled, recreated again and again under the right environmental stimulus. The place I can reach, under the right conditions on the dance floor is spiritual.

Growing up, pop music was considered to be a gateway drug to a relationship with Satan. Evidenced by one of the few pop records my mother approved of – Cliff Richard's naff classic – *Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music*? Which borrows all its riffs from the (presumably Satanic) blues – claiming them back by inference for white people and for God.

At a Billy Graham rally I went to as a child in Bristol, the singing was as rousing as match day, the invitation, immediately afterwards, to give your soul to Jesus a neat trick. Build up the crowd to an ecstatic pitch through music and then provide a religious explanation for the experience. People poured down the front to be blessed by Billy Graham, the old handsome American huckster. His

charisma lay in his good looks and his ability to connect mass hysteria to the metaphysical.

It always fascinated me that a significant number of casualties from the early days of rave, individuals who blew their minds with excessive quantities of drugs, ended up in the Jesus Army. Their buses could usually be seen at the peripheries of the legal raves that emerged in the mid-90s. Often their members had had religious experiences on the dance floor and depressive ones on the comedown, but they connected their ecstatic experiences to a closeness with God, and saw in the lights and smoke a moving of the Holy Spirit. They also tried to convert others through their example of straight edge living, witnessing for Jesus in the middle of the rave. But for me they miss the point: dancing is a spiritual, not a religious experience; its mysteries are biological, psychological, deeply individual.

The sound has moved up a gear. Len Faki has changed the beat from a minimal military rhythm to something more complex. He drops a trippy break, a kind of backwards synthesiser and the crowd cheers, the dancing accelerates. DJ sets at Berghain can last for five, six, seven hours; the DJs build with the crowd a sound journey, slower, faster, louder, softer. A good DJ can sense the energy of the crowd and pushes the sound to control their experience. Now I can sense the music as shapes around my body. I finish my drink and push through the crowds into the middle of the dance floor. I relax and give my body to the beat and the heat rises.

A few weeks ago a friend of mine died from an inoperable brain tumour. For weeks I have carried a heavy weight of grief, a sense of life as fragile, unreal. I held his warm hand hours before they switched off the life support, the machines that kept him alive beeping their measurements into the cold hospital.

My friend was queer, always at right angles to everything, never quite fitting in. He found in Berlin a home of sorts, although everything for him was always tenuous. He was an artist, open, oversensitive, unable to hold down a job, too argumentative, too aware of the hypocrisy that underpins most labour, the centre would never hold. To some he might be marginal, but he was always a survivor. And fifty is no age to die. There was still so much he had to do, to offer. I am here for him too, to do something with the sadness that I have been carrying in my body.

It's not lost on me that there is a persistent beeping in this track that sounds like one of his machines. He was brain dead by the time I saw him, yet his body was warm, his skin glowing. The life support was keeping his body alive, even while he was dead. The scans showed a black mass where his brain activity should be. Where did he go? What is left of a human when they are still breathing but their brain is dead? This imponderable question has been bothering me for weeks.

I look into the crowd and for a heart stopping second think I can see him coming towards me, with his boyish smile, his stories of how brilliantly he was getting on with the book we both knew he wasn't writing. His many kindnesses. Phrases, gestures, noises come back to me. Him saying 'I'll hate him til the day I die' or 'over my dead body'. Commonplaces that now seem like prophecies.

I let myself into the rhythm and my limbs move of their own accord. I don't control it. I'm not making any rehearsed moves, just letting my nervous system respond to the beat. My arms and legs and torso move as if connected to the sound, bypassing consciousness.

At some point I pass through the mirror into this uncanny, techno place. I am not aware of myself. I am at once, all body and no body. I am out of time, out of language, my mind all sensation. The sound makes shapes, red, green, purple, which become like a physical building that the beat starts to build around me. The music has a kind of architecture, which I can see in my mind's eye. At this saturation, the sound creates its own spatial awareness, its own metaphysical structures. In this place I am connected to something bigger than me, a place outside the ego. The split parts of me, are for these few moments, suddenly whole.

On an atomic level, my physicality is being changed by the pressure waves coming from the speakers, from the movement of all the other humans around me. I am on the dance floor and above it at the same time. Even though I am surrounded by people I am solitary. I'm not even in a club, on a dance floor, but in some other space and time entirely. I am entering the trance.

Bjork describes it best: *I had been away from Iceland for over a year and when I returned for New Year I stayed on top of a mountain. I went for a walk on my own and I saw the ice was thawing in the lava fields. All I could hear was the cackle of the ice, echoing over hundreds of square miles. It was pitch black, the Northern Lights were swirling around and just below them was a layer of thick cloud. I could see the lights from all the towns in my childhood mirrored in the reflection of these clouds, with the lava fields cackling below. It was really techno.*

I don't know how long I'm in there. I don't have a watch and I don't want to look at my phone, but at some point a change in the music, a tiredness in my legs, makes me stop. My body and the sound un-synch and all I can hear is noise.

I go to the upstairs bar where the music is softer – more house than techno. The space is full of people talking, some still nodding to the beat. I sit on a ledge with my back against the glass, peek out through the shutters. It's dark now, and there is a long queue stretching all the way along past the beer kiosk and beyond. My head throbs.

I look at my phone. It's eight thirty. I've been dancing for about five hours straight and my body is tingling. I light a cigarette and a girl next to me asks to share it. She's from London, happy to be here.

'They've shut all the clubs in London,' she says. Which is true.

We talk about London nightlife. How spaces are smaller, further out from the centre, often temporary, always over policed, controlled by security in high vis jackets. You're always aware of being watched. There is still a subculture of illegal parties in some of the warehouse communities, but everything is provisional, there is no sense that the city really wants to allow nightlife of this old, urban kind. When land values are so stratospheric nothing is sacred. Too often it seems as if London is heading towards the obediently dreary capitalist street culture of somewhere like Singapore or Zurich except with more homeless.

In return for a cigarette the girl buys me a beer. We talk for a while, shake our heads at our fear at what may come – we laugh at our own intensity, talking

politics in a nightclub. When she stands to leave she kisses me before it can become a thought. She tastes of beer and chewing gum.

'Come to the dark room.' She says, holding out a hand to help me stand.

We go to a room behind the main dance floor. At first it's hard to see. There is a dim light somewhere behind me everything is in shadow. There is a squash of bodies, mainly men. Someone is masturbating, in the middle are two men fucking and behind them a man with a woman pushed up against the wall, her expression a wide, wild, O. Techno thuds through the walls and the room has the heat of arousal. She kisses me again, this time for much longer. We press into each other, fumble with zips and buttons, touch arms, skin, fingers, lips, breasts, until we both shine with sweat and desire. I think of the huge statue of a Bacchus-like figure holding a giant cornucopia in the lobby by the Garderobe. Sex, is the logical extension of the energy being raised on the dance floor, in this place we are all Maenad.

Afterwards, we emerge to the dance floor, blinking, as if into daylight. We catch another beat, start to dance. The hairs on my arms thicken and prickle as another acid break ripples through the crowd. The dancing gets harder and again, I am in thrall of the beat.

I lose the girl from London, find her again later in the queue for the Garderobe. It's now well after midnight and I'm done. I feel as if someone has taken me apart and not-so-subtly rearranged me. Not bad for two Club Mates and a beer. We hug goodbye, kind of awkwardly, considering.

Outside it's raining, the wet streets an empty urban slick. I get on my bike, cycle home, past the remnants of the Berlin wall now covered in street art for the

tourists, and the Oberbaumbrücke, the extravagantly turreted gothic bridge that straddles the Spree. All that night and for a long time afterwards, my head is full of echoes, flashes of light and colour, touch, and the persistent rhythm of the machines, beeping like life support.